

PERSONAL NARRATIVES
OF THE
BATTLES OF THE REBELLION
BEING
PAPERS READ BEFORE THE
RHODE ISLAND SOLDIERS AND SAILORS
HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

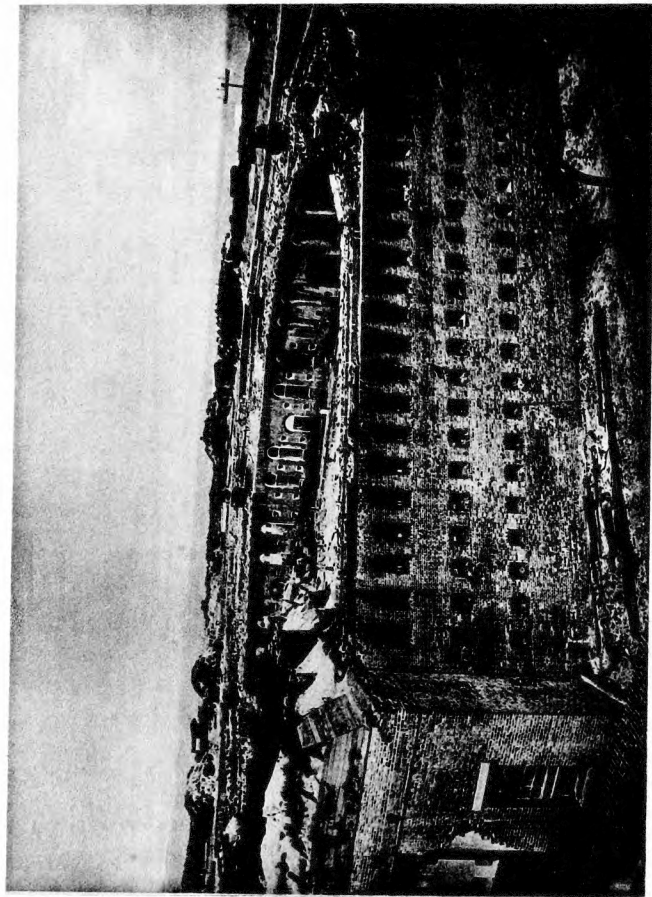
No. 8.

*“ Quaeque ipse miserrima vidi,
Et quorum pars magna fui.”*

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FORT MORGAN, CITADEL.

FROM THE SOUTH SIDE.

The vessel to the right is the Lackawanna—her position during second and third days bombardment and at the surrender.

THE BAY FIGHT

A SKETCH OF THE

BATTLE OF MOBILE BAY

AUGUST 5TH, 1864.

BY WILLIAM F. HUTCHINSON, M. D.,

(Late Acting Passed Assistant Surgeon, United States Navy.)

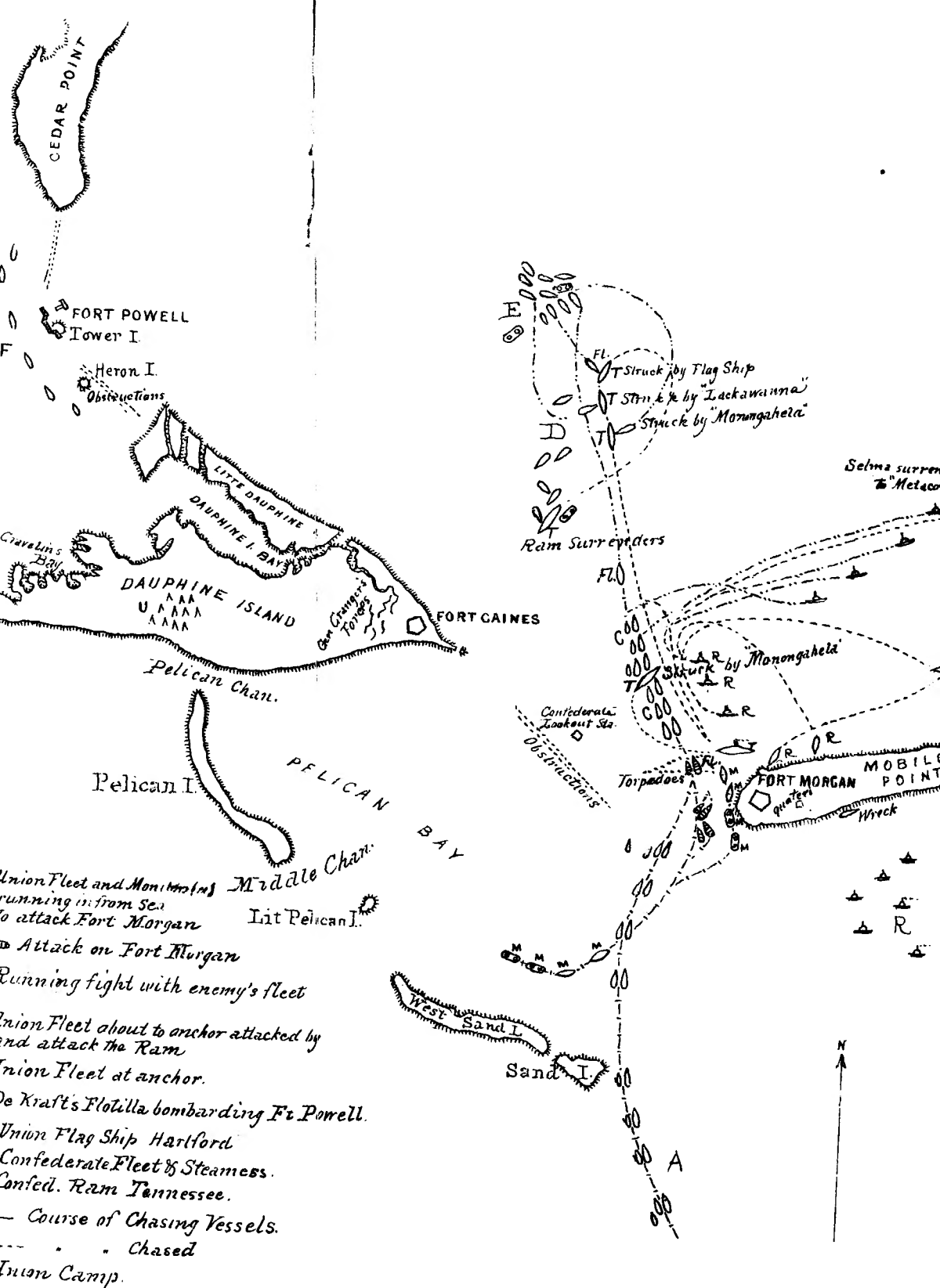


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Union Fleet and Monitor (s) running in from Sea to attack Fort Morgan

Attack on Fort Morgan

Running fight with enemy's fleet

Union Fleet about to anchor attacked by and attack the Ram

Union Fleet at anchor.

De Kraft's Flotilla bombarding Ft Powell.

Union Flag Ship Hartford

Confederate Fleet & Steamers.

Confed. Ram Tennessee.

Course of Chasing Vessels.

Chased

Union Camp.

THE BAY FIGHT
OR THE
BATTLE OF MOBILE BAY.

[Read before the Society, October 4th, 1876.]



ONE by one the more northern strongholds of the rebel seacoast had fallen before the combined attacks of our gallant army and navy, and at last all was in readiness to deal a blow on the Gulf coast which should blot out the most important station remaining in the possession of the rebel government. For three years, Mobile Bay, with its many channels of entrance, its various and continually changing bars, and its powerful defences, had been a point whence much successful blockade running had been carried on, and wherein had been fitted out two of the boldest and most unscrupulous of the piratical rovers dignified by the name of Confederate men-of-war.

Within its protecting forts lay the only remaining

fleet of the enemy, commanded by Admiral Buchanan (F.), in his flag ship, the ram Tennessee. Between this officer and his ship existed strong points of resemblance. He, the last and only Confederate Admiral afloat—a stern, pitiless man, deaf to all considerations save those of mistaken duty to a bad cause, brave as a lion and a superb officer ; it—their strongest, costliest and last ironclad, their boast and pride—they were indeed fitted to go down together.

It had become necessary to break up this nest of treason, for the blockade runners, barred from their whilom ports by the victorious progress of our arms, came here in great numbers, laden with vast quantities of munitions of war and provisions ; and, notwithstanding the most painstaking vigilance on the part of the fleet, few dark nights and no single stormy one passed without one or more of these “carrier doves,” as the Southern dames called them, finding their way into the beleaguered harbor.

This reason determined Admiral Farragut (D. G.) to hasten the attack which he had long held in contemplation, and a call was made upon General Canby (E. R. S.) for a military force sufficient to

co-operate with the navy and hold the forts when captured. To this duty was assigned Major General Gordon Granger, with a sufficient force of artillery and infantry.

The morning of August 4th, 1864, dawned beautifully clear, and the blue waters of the Mexican Gulf stretched away southward a thousand miles to the Venezuelan shore, while to the north its waves plashed lazily in a tropical sun against the white sand of Dauphin Island and Mobile Point, between which curved the winding channel of entrance to the bay. Twenty-six stately ships of war lay at anchor on the bar six miles from land, their long pennants and colors clinging to the spars, while from one to the other flashed small boats with their crews of blue jackets, and with gold-laced officers in the stern sheets, from whose uniforms the sunbeams glinted merrily. Instead of being away on their stations, deployed in such a manner as to draw a cordon of guard around the harbor entrance, the ships were massed around one central vessel, from whose lofty mizzen truck floated the broad blue pennant of the noblest sailor of them all, Rear Admiral Farragut, our glorious and beloved chieftain.

It was evident that something was brewing, and when, an hour later, the signal displayed from the Hartford read, "Commanding officers repair on board flagship"—all hands were on the alert, knowing the signal meant a war council. And when, a little later, the great monitor Tecumseh came steaming slowly up from the eastward, direct from New York, and anchored near the other ironclads, which had arrived the night before, we knew that the decisive moment, the moment for which we had been waiting so eagerly and long, was at hand. About noon the captain of the Lackawanna, John B. Marchand, with which vessel I was then serving as assistant surgeon, returned, and one glance at his stern old face told us of coming strife. As he passed aft, he beckoned the executive officer, Lieutenant Spencer (Thomas S.), and, after a moment's conversation, the latter came forward, his face all aglow with excitement as he said, "Tomorrow at daylight, fellows, hurrah!"

We had known for two weeks which ships were to participate, as they had been away to Pensacola navy yard, two at a time, for the purpose of stripping off all the spars and rigging which might inter-

fere with their efficiency in action, and to have their sides covered, opposite the boilers and machinery, with a double casing of heavy chain cable, so as in some measure to ironclad them over their weakly-protected vitals.

Considerable delay had already been experienced in awaiting the arrival of the heavy monitors, without whose aid it was deemed unwise to attack the formidable ram Tennessee, of whose strength we only knew that the rebel engineers called her the most powerful ever built, and no one had yet forgotten the Atlanta or the Merrimac. Admiral Faragut would have attacked without them, had they delayed another day, and the result of the action proved the correctness of his often-repeated assertion, "that the same officers and men taken from an iron clad and put on board of a wooden ship, would give a better account of themselves, and have a better chance in the latter than in the former," or as he sometimes put it, "Give me hearts of iron in ships of oak."

At noon on the fourth of August, the order of battle was sent on board the ships which were to

participate, and the line formed as shown in the diagram, viz. : the Brooklyn and Octorara, the Hartford and Metacomet, the Richmond and Port Royal, the Lackawanna and Seminole, the Monongahela and Kennebec, the Ossipee and Itasca, the Oneida and Galena—and the four monitors—Tecumseh, Manhattan, Winnebago and Chickasaw. The order read :

“FLAG-SHIP HARTFORD,
OFF MOBILE BAY, August 4th, 1864. } ”

The above diagram will be observed to-morrow morning, or when the fleet goes in.

D. G. FARRAGUT, *Rear Admiral.*”

Then we knew that before twenty-four hours passed, we should either be inside Mobile Bay, conquerors of the stronghold and captors of the rebel fleet, or be ourselves quietly at rest beneath its muddy waters. Yet one would have thought the busy preparation on every hand for some fête—some pleasure sail, so gay were officers and men. Many had left their valuables ashore at Pensacola to be forwarded to relatives in case of disaster—and now it only remained to while away the few remaining hours as

best we might. Scores of officers from the left-out ships came aboard to negotiate exchanges with some of the lucky ones, but not one man could be found who would trade and stay out. All were certain of success under our beloved chieftain, although we knew there was hot work ahead; for, as you will see by the diagram, we were to pass and did pass within eight hundred yards of Fort Morgan and its powerful water batteries upon which the rebel engineers placed their main dependence, and which, we had been informed, mounted more than one hundred heavy guns. Yet we clinked glasses merrily with our stay-behind comrades, and they bade us good night with envious faces, cursing their luck—each one wishing that something might happen to one of the attacking fleet, so that his own ship could have a chance in the fray.

Morning came at last, after so busy a night that only an hour could be given to sleep. At eight bells, or four o'clock, all hands were turned out, and our consort, the Seminole, steamed alongside and was made fast to us on the port side. The vessels were double-banked in this manner, in order that

the farthest from the fort and protected from its fire might carry the other through, should she either be disabled by shot or have her propeller entangled in any of the numerous floating ropes with which the rebels had filled the channel, for that express purpose. The morning was beautifully clear, and the battlements of Forts Morgan and Gaines, with the few gaunt pines on Mobile Point, stood out in clear relief against the blazing eastern sky, all giving promise of a fine day. Later, as is usually the result of heavy cannonading, clouds came up, and a slight shower occurred during the latter part of the action.

The Brooklyn, with the Octorara, steamed into position at the head of the line, and the other vessels fell in as soon as possible, at intervals of fifty yards. The flagship did not lead, because the Brooklyn was fitted with an ingenious contrivance to catch torpedoes, called a devil, composed of a number of long iron hooks attached to a spar, which was slung from the bow-sprit and sunk even with the ship's keel, and for the further reason that her commander, Captain Alden (James), knew the channel thoroughly, as he

had been chief of the coast survey in ante-bellum days, and author of the official charts of the harbor.

At twenty minutes to six the line was formed, and we commenced to steam in slowly, the Admiral's order being to carry the lowest possible pressure, so as to avoid as much as possible the fearful scalding effect of the steam, should the boilers be pierced. The ships were dressed from stem to stern in flags, as if for a gala day, and every man sprang to his station with a will when the long roll called all hands to general quarters, which was sounded the moment we were fairly under way.

As the Brooklyn came within range of the fort, the rebels opened the dance with a single gun, a three hundred pounder Armstrong, at precisely seven o'clock. It is a curious sight to watch a single shot from so heavy a piece of ordnance. First, you see the puff of white smoke upon the distant ramparts and then you see the shot coming, looking exactly as if some gigantic hand had thrown in play a ball toward you. By the time it is half way, you get the boom of the report, and then the howl of the missile, which apparently grows so rapidly in size

that every green hand on board who can see it, is certain that it will hit him between the eyes. Then, as it goes past with a shriek like a thousand devils, the inclination to do reverence is so strong that it is almost impossible to resist it. On board the Lackawanna we had several youngsters just from the Academy, and it was amusing to see how the nerves which were as steel an hour later, gave way at first. Leaving their respective stations as the great shot drew near, they ran, fore and aft, bump against one another in their efforts to get out of the way. The laughter of the older officers speedily recalled them to their senses, and they made good time back to their guns, which were none the less bravely fought for the momentary weakness. For half an hour, as we steamed up into range, the fleet took the entire rebel fire without returning a gun, and the minutes seemed like hours. But at last the signal came, "Commence firing," the cannonade grew furious, and the scene became terribly exciting and fascinating. It is difficult to explain to those who have never taken part in any closely contested battle, the complete loss of personal fear which occurs

as soon as work fairly begins. Comrades are falling in every direction around you, yet no thought of danger enters one's brain and the only impulse is to kill as many of the enemy as possible—men are transformed into tigers.

The battle was a fair one, ships against brick walls and earth works, each side doing its level best. As the fleet came into action, however, the broadsides came too fast and heavy for any mortal beings to stand, and the rebel soldiers fled from the parapet in dismay. Shell, grape and canister from the great cannon went hissing through the air, until it seemed as if hell itself had broken loose, and smoke was so dense on the decks and water that both fort and vessels were completely hidden and we both fired at the flashes of the guns alone.

Admiral Farragut, finding it impossible to see his ships from the deck so as to direct their movements, ascended the main rigging nearly to the top, whence he had a clear view, being above the smoke which lay so thick below. Captain Drayton (Percival), fearing that a chance shot might cut the shrouds and let the Admiral fall, sent a quartermaster aloft who

passed one end of a signal halyard around the Admiral and made him fast to the mainyard, so that there was no danger from that source. And Admiral Farragut was so completely absorbed in the fight that he did not discover what had been done until he came to descend after we had passed the forts.

The rebels now opened from the guns of the water batteries, eight inch guns and Armstrong rifles, which being on a level with the ships, did fearful execution. The Monongahela was struck many times, and Lieutenant Prentiss (Roderick), her executive officer, had his right leg torn off by a whole shell, and Captain Mullany (J. R. M.), of the Oneida, lost an arm in the same way. The latter vessel was struck by a heavy shell which, having penetrated completely through the chain armor and side of the vessel, exploded in her starboard boiler, instantly filling her engine and fire-rooms with steam. Every one of the fire-room gang was disabled, many being instantly killed by inhaling the vapor, and some of the bodies presented the ghastly spectacle of white bones from which the flesh had been stripped by the boiling steam. The vessel was disabled and

was towed in by her consort, the Galena, nevertheless keeping her guns going steadily. A two hundred pounder shell, on its upward ricochet from the water, struck the port sill of the Lackawanna under the three hundred pounder rifle and killed and wounded one half of its crew, including Lieutenant McCarty (S. A.), who was struck by a flying splinter and badly hurt. The shell then went overboard through the foremast without exploding. The other vessels got their fair share of attention from the enemy, but were not disabled.

The ram Tennessee started out from behind the fort just before the head of the line was abreast of it, intending to attack the fleet seriatim; but, receiving two or three broadsides, changed her course and ran back again closely followed by the monitor Tecumseh. As the latter neared the fort, pounding away at the ram with fifteen inch solid shot, she struck a floating cask torpedo and exploded it. As was afterwards ascertained by the divers, the explosion tore a hole in her bottom more than twenty feet square, and she sank like a stone—turning over as she went down in eight fathoms of water. By this

frightful disaster one hundred and ten out of one hundred and twenty men were lost in a single instant. Commander Tunis A. M. Craven, one of the most gallant officers in the service, lost his life through his noble disregard of self. He was in the pilot house with the pilot, close to the only opening in the whole ship, and this was only large enough to allow one man to pass at once. Captain Craven was already partly out, when the pilot grasped him by the leg, and cried "Let me get out first, Captain for God's sake; I have five little children!" The Captain drew back, saying "Go on, sir," gave him his place, and went down with his ship, while the pilot was saved. A week afterwards, when the divers went down to examine the wreck, they found nearly all the crew at their posts, as they sank. The chief engineer, who had been married in New York only two weeks before, and who had received from the flag-ship's mail his letters while the line was forming, stood with one hand upon the revolving bar of the turret engine, and in the other an open letter from his bride, which his dead eyes still seemed to be reading.

By this time, the fleet was nearly past the forts, and the head of the line about crossing the middle ground, the ram still lying quietly under the guns of the fort. Cheer after cheer rent the air from hundreds of lusty throats, as the ships came, two by two, inside the bay, the goal we had been longing for so eagerly for three long years. Comrades shook hands, congratulated each other and hurrahed until hoarse. The wounded were brought up from below and comfortably stowed away in cots, and the dead were decently composed for their long, last sleep, on the port side of the berth deck forward.

But all too soon ; for another, and for us the hardest tug, was yet to come. Admiral Buchanan, in the Tennessee, had made up his mind to attack the whole fleet, and as her officers said afterwards, do his best and sink his ship with all hands or conquer. On she came, steadily and fast, paying no more attention to the terrible fire that was concentrated upon her from the entire fleet than to so many hail stones, and attempted to ram several of the large ships. Having cast loose from their consorts, they were too fast for her, and she did not manage to strike a

single one. Soon the monitors came up, and solid eleven and fifteen inch shot struck her a dozen a minute from a range of less than a hundred yards without the slightest effect, she blazing away with her battery of seven inch Brooks rifles. Never was ship more gallantly fought against more fearful odds. Finding what small impression our fire was making upon her, the Admiral now signalled the Lackawanna, Monongahela and Ossipee, "Run down the rebel ram." Four bells—"go ahead, full speed,"—rang from the bridge, the captain's post, and we went at her. The Monongahela missed her aim the first time, striking obliquely a glancing blow with no harmful effect to either. The Lackawanna was more fortunate and delivered a fair blow, going at the tremendous speed of fourteen knots, just where the iron house joined the main deck, with a shock that prostrated every man on deck and tore to atoms her solid oak bow for six feet as if it had been paper. No more damage was done the ram by this tremendous blow than if a lady had laid her finger upon the iron sheathing, and a careful inspection of the spot where the contact occurred, made directly

after the surrender, showed for the sole result a few oaken fibres forced directly into the iron. The Lackawanna backed clear of the Tennessee, when the latter swung around on our port beam and delivered her broadside into us at three feet distance, at the same time receiving the fire of the only gun that could be sufficiently depressed to reach her, our deck being several feet higher out of water than hers. Her shell, ninety-eight pounder percussion, all exploded on the berth deck, just as they entered the ship, entirely destroying the powder division, with the exception of the officer in command, Ensign Rathbone (Clarence), who was wounded by flying splinters. The surgeon's steward and one nurse were torn into such small pieces that no part of either of them was ever identified.

The scene on the berth deck was dismal enough. So full of smoke that where a moment before was a crowd of busy men, nothing was visible except the red glare of the blazing woodwork which had taken fire from the exploding shell, with no sound beside the groans of the wounded and dying and the thunder of cannon overhead, a new element of horror was

added by the news that the magazine was on fire ! In that chamber were stored seventeen tons of gunpowder, and if the flames reached that, our shrift were short indeed. In the magazine of a man-of-war, the powder is put up in cartridges of red flannel, of various sizes, and these are stored for greater safety in copper canisters, each containing about one hundred pounds. In passing up the cartridges to the boys whose duty it was to carry them to the guns, and who are called powder monkeys, the gunner had shaken out on the floor of the magazine passage a small quantity of powder which lay in little heaps along the passage, a long narrow way leading from the berth deck to the main chamber. From one of these little heaps to another, and around the prostrate form of the gunner, who had been stunned by the concussion, flame was flashing toward the deadly mass, when the ship's armorer, George Taylor, came at a leap down from the spar deck, and seeing at a glance the deadly peril, sprang down into the passage and extinguished the fire with his naked hands, burning them to the bone in the process—but saving all our lives and the brave old

ship. How many men would have had the pluck to go down into a magazine full of powder, a part of which was actually burning, and take the chances of being able to put it out with his naked hands, is a problem which I leave you to solve. The gallant tar was publicly thanked the next day by Captain Marchand (J. B.) before the entire crew, and subsequently received the medal of honor which Congress voted for acts of special bravery.*

Then the *Monongahela* returned to the attack and struck the ram fairly amidships, only injuring herself by the blow. The rebel officers were astounded at the audacity of wooden ships attacking their vessel in this way, they expecting that the ironclads would alone dare to fight them. The ram now stood away for the fort, followed by the whole fleet and almost covered with shot. Her smoke stack was gone level with the deck, her steering gear, which,

* From "The Record of the Medals of Honor issued to the Blue Jackets and Marines of the Navy, under the authority of the Congress of the United States, for Deeds of Gallantry and Heroism in times of War and of Peace":—

"GEORGE TAYLOR, armorer on board of the United States steamer '*Lackawanna*,' although wounded, went into the shell-room and with his hands extinguished the fire from a shell exploded over it by the enemy."

by some unaccountable stupidity, was rove on deck instead of below, was shot away, and, at ten o'clock precisely, she hauled down her colors, and ran up the white flag, amidst thundering cheers from all hands of us, and feelings of indescribable exultation. Admiral Buchanan handed his sword to Lieutenant Giraud, temporarily of the *Ossipee*, who ran up the stars and stripes and carried the sword to the gallant *Farragut* on board the *Hartford*. Admiral Buchanan being wounded in the leg by a splinter, the ship was given up by her commander, Captain Johnson (J. D.), with the assurance that if the officers had had their way, the ship would have been blown up before surrender, but that the men got wind of their intention and prevented it.

During the latter part of the engagement, the *Metacombet*, under Lieutenant Commander James E. Jouett, chased the rebel gunboat *Selma* up the bay, and, going two knots to her one, speedily overhauled her. After a running fight and the reception of two broadsides, Captain Murphy (P. U.) hauled down his colors and surrendered, — himself wounded, his first lieutenant killed, and one-third of his crew

hors du combat. The Morgan escaped up the bay to Mobile, and the Gaines, the last of Admiral Buchanan's fleet, was run ashore and set on fire by her crew, who then escaped into the woods.

Thus ended this glorious battle, with a glorious victory, the hardest fought naval engagement of the war, and, as was said by foreign critics, one of the fiercest on record. Indeed, it was the only one of the rebellion, except the duel of the Kearsarge and Alabama, when ships met ships fairly. It gave us entire possession of the harbor, cutting off the most available source of rebel supply from abroad, capturing their famous ram and whole fleet, thereby proving the hollowness of Admiral Buchanan's boast, "That he would sink every one of Farragut's ships or blow them out of water," and establishing the maxim that no shore fortifications, however strong, can stop the passage of a well-handled fleet of war ships. This can only be effected by a system of torpedoes, which, in 1864, were not understood as now.

During the passage of the forts, the spectacle of the naval engagement from shore was so superb,

that the troops, which were fighting at Fort Gaines, on Dauphin Island, suspended operations by mutual consent for two hours, and watched the ships. About midnight the rebels evacuated and blew up Fort Powell, giving us a clear passage to New Orleans via Mississippi Sound, and completely isolating Fort Gaines, which surrendered to Admiral Farragut the next day.

It was this gallant fight which, in the opinion of the "British Army and Navy Journal," the leading military authority in Europe, placed the noble Farragut at the head of the living naval commanders of the world, and gave him equal fame with Nelson. Greater praise from Englishmen, there could be none. The loss of the fleet, excluding the *Tecumseh*, was fifty-two killed, two hundred severely wounded and about two hundred more slightly hurt.

It was wonderful to witness the courage of the men who were mortally wounded. One of our quarter-gunners who had both arms shot away above the elbows, and was supposed to be dead from the shock, astonished me by asking, while I was attending a man near by, "Have we got in yet, sir?"

"Yes," I replied, "we have, thank God?" "Then hurrah for our Admiral!" he exclaimed, and was dead in a moment afterward.

The next morning, the Admiral issued the following general order, which was read on board each ship while yet our dead were with us, and while the marks of the fight on every hand so powerfully emphasized the words :

"FLAGSHIP HARTFORD, }
MOBILE BAY, August 6th, 1864. }

"The Admiral returns thanks to the officers and crews of the Fleet for their gallant conduct during the fight. It has never been his good fortune to see men do their duty with more cheerfulness, for, although they knew the enemy was prepared with all devilish means for their destruction, and witnessed the almost instantaneous annihilation of our gallant companions in the *Tecumseh* by a torpedo, and the slaughter of their friends and messmates and gunmates, still there was not the slightest evidence of hesitation to follow your Commander-in-chief through the line of torpedoes and obstructions of which we knew nothing, except from the exaggerations of the enemy, 'that we would be blown up, as certainly as we attempted to enter.' For this blind confidence in your leader, he thanks you.

D. G. FARRAGUT, *Rear Admiral.*"

And again, General Order No. 13 :

“FLAGSHIP HARTFORD, }
SUNDAY MORNING, August 7th, 1864. }

“The Admiral desires the Fleet to return thanks to Almighty God for the signal victory over the enemy on the morning of the 5th instant.

D. G. FARRAGUT, *Rear Admiral.*”

